

The Long Arm of an Eighteenth-Century Bonpo Patron: Gyalrong and Dolpo between the Jinchuan Wars

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Finding an appropriate subject for a contribution to a volume such as this is a remarkably easy matter. Dan Martin's list of publications covers such an extraordinary range of subjects within and beyond the field of Tibetan Studies that one does not have to search far or for long to find a topic that corresponds to something within one's own more limited fund of competences. Tibetology owes an immense debt to Dan for his prolific and wide-ranging work on the subject of the Bon religion in general, and this contribution is intended to add a small brick to a particular edifice that he has helped to build within this domain: the role of Gyalrong (Rgyal rong) in the promulgation of Bon. His "Bonpo Canons and Jesuit Cannons" (1990), a study of the two Jinchuan Wars waged by the Qing government against Gyalrong in the eighteenth century, offers a startling perspective on the sectarian interpretation of the events recorded in Thu'u bkwan's biography of the Gelugpa hierarch Lcang skya Rol pa'i rdo rje. The two wars (1747-1749 and 1771-1776), and the second in particular, resulted in the destruction of the political strength of Gyalrong and considerably diminished it as a stronghold of the Bon religion. The present article deals with an altogether happier time, a moment in the two decades of interbellum peace when good relations prevailed between Gyalrong and Beijing, and when the rulers of the former were still in a position to extend their patronage to the geographically most remote institutions of the Bon religion.

Relations between Bonpos across the plateau and even beyond it are many and intricate, and much work remains to be done to clarify the dynamics of these networks over the course of time. In addition to the biographies of relatively well-known authors, the colophons of minor texts composed by lesser figures, contained in private collections in the Himalayas, can help us to form a clearer picture of these complex connections. The importance of Bonpos from Gyalrong in the development of the religion in Central Tibet is well known: Mnyam med Shes rab rgyal mtshan (1356-1416), the founder of Menri (Sman ri), the main Bonpo monastery in Central Tibet, was from Gyalrong, as were the great majority of its subsequent abbots. Gyal-

rong's western connections with Bonpo communities did not stop at Menri, but extended westwards as far as Dolpo (Dol po), in modern-day Nepal. One of the disciples of Shar rdza Bkra shis rgyal mtshan (1859-1935) was a certain Bstan 'dzin rgyal mtshan, a member of the Ya ngal clan from Dolpo (Gorvine 2019: 238), a portrait of whom even appears in a mural in a monastery of Geshitsa (Dge shes tsa, among other spellings).¹

But the connection between Gyalrong and Dolpo goes back much further than the time of Shar rdza. The document that forms the focus of this article is a testimony to Gyalrong's patronage of Himalayan lamas a century and a half earlier. Before discussing this document, however, a few words should be said by way of introduction to the two places with which we are principally concerned: Samling in Dolpo (Nepal), and Gyalrong in present-day Sichuan, as well as the political context in which the document was composed.

1. *The priest...*

Samling is a cluster of small clan-based gonpas situated at around 4300 metres above sea level in Dolpo, Nepal. The oldest of the gonpas belongs to the Ya ngal clan, a priestly lineage that the *Dbā' bzhed* records as being in Central Tibet in the eighth century (Wangdu and Diemberger 2000: 94-95), but that established itself in Mustang, and subsequently Dolpo, in the 12th and 13th centuries. The oldest surviving Bonpo settlement in Nepal is Lubrak (Klu brag), in southern Mustang. Originally a settlement of non-Tibetan troglodytes, Lubrak became an important centre of Bon following the arrival of Bkra shis rgyal mtshan (1131-1215) of the Ya ngal clan in the late twelfth century. One of Bkra shis rgyal mtshan's sons, Bla ma sngags pa, is credited with having travelled to Dolpo and founded the settlement of Bicher. The same Bla ma sngags pa was also instrumental in founding Samling, some two hours' walk from Bicher. According to his biography,

his son Ya ngal Bha su died at the age of twenty-one, and he therefore brought Yang ston² Rgyal mtshan rin chen, the eight-year-old son of Ya ngal Phur pa skyabs from Tagtse Jiri (Stag rtse Byi ri), the village in Upper Tsang to which his ancestors had travelled. It is said that afterwards all the Yang ston fathers and sons of Stag rtse abruptly left and went to Ngari (Mnga' ris). Together with [Rgyal mtshan rin chen, b. 1278], he [Bla ma sngags pa] established a gonpa at Samling (Bsam gtan gling). (Yang

¹ Naljor Tsering, personal communication 8 November 2021.

² Yang ston, the usual title of eminent lamas from this lineage, is a contraction of *ya ngal gyi ston pa*, "teacher from the Ya ngal [clan]".

sgom fol. 41r)

The Ya ngal lineage died out in Mustang in the late nineteenth century, but continued to flourish in Samling and other parts of Dolpo, where its prestige ensured it the support of a number of patrons, including the kings of Mustang and, as we shall see, of Gyalrong. The present scion of the family in Samling is Lama Shes rab bstan 'dzin, a direct descendant of Rgyal mtshan rin chen.

2. ...and the patron

European language works on the history of Gyalrong in the 18th century are rather sparse, but we are fortunate that the few publications that are available are highly informative. While there are passing mentions in several studies, the main sources, apart from the article by Dan Martin cited above, are a study by Roger Greatrex of the causes of the first Jinchuan war of 1747 to 1749 (Greatrex 1994), and a more general survey of the two conflicts by Patrick Mansier (1990). Other works that deal tangentially with the conflict include Karmay 1998 and 2005, while a helpful overview of the area and its history is given by Gray Tuttle.³

Gyalrong refers to the region northeast of Dartsedo that is bounded by four rivers: on the west by the Dadu, on the south by the Xiao Jinchuan, on the east by the Lixian and on the north by the Suomo, a northern tributary of the Dadu (Mansier 1990: 125). While Chinese sources refer to ten principalities, Tibetan works conventionally speak of eighteen kingdoms. The most important of these were Great Jinchuan or Rabten (Rab brtan), and Little Jinchuan or Tsenla (Btsan la), though several others are also of significance. The most important of these for the purposes of the present study is Trokyab (Khro skyabs),⁴ which actually lies to the northwest of the territorial heartland delineated above.

The following outline of the causes of the Jinchuan Wars is based primarily on the accounts given by Mansier and Greatrex. The ostensible reason for the Qing government's declaration of war was the intransigence of Slob dpon, the ruler of Rabten. In 1745, Slob dpon

³ Tuttle 2017. For a study of the logistical, strategic and financial aspects of the two Jinchuan Wars see Theobald 2013; for a study of cultural and social identity in modern Gyalrong, see Jinba 2013.

⁴ The name of Khro skyabs also appears in both Tibetan and secondary sources as Khro bcu and Khro chen. According to Karmay, "While Khro-skyabs designates a large area, Khro-chen is applied specifically to the place where the palace of the Khro-chen kings, Drug-zur rnam-rgyal-rdzong, was situated and is particularly used as the name of the royal house" (Karmay 1998: 46).

married his daughter to the king of Tsenla. However, because he considered the young king, Tshe dbang, to be an unsuitable ruler, he placed Tshe dbang's brother on the throne instead. This incensed the Qing authorities, who insisted that the order of succession be restored. The following year, Slob dpon went on to invade a neighbouring kingdom, Geshitsa, and annexed some of its territory. While these two acts are generally cited as the causes of the war, the real reason was in fact more complex than this. These two acts of provocation by Slob dpon were the culmination of a series of disturbances in the borderlands: first, an uprising by the Goloks and then, in 1744, an attack on a detachment of Qing soldiers by bandits from the Gyalrong kingdom of Drandul (Dgra 'dul), whose ruler was named Dpal mgon. The two-year campaign, that had left a significant dent in the Qing treasury, caused major casualties on both sides and resulted in the execution or forced suicide of several Qing generals for their perceived failings, ended in an extraordinary anticlimax, with the pardon of Slob dpon and Dpal mgon, whose actions had led to the outbreak of hostilities in the first place.

Twenty years after the end of the first war, Slob dpon's nephew and successor, Nam mkha', combined forces with the rulers of Tsenla and of Trokyab to oppose the Qing dominance. Nam mkha' died and was succeeded by his son, Bsod noms, who attacked the neighbouring kingdoms of Geshitsa and Azhi ('A gzhi). The Qing forces who were dispatched to pacify the Gyalrong aggressors were badly beaten. Qianlong resolved to put an end to the insurgency irrespective of what the cost might be, and the result was an even more protracted, bloody and expensive conflict than the first war. The king of Trochen was killed in the fighting in 1773 (Martin 1990, 21, fn. 34), and Bsod noms, ruler of Rabten, was one of several to be executed in Beijing after their eventual surrender.

3. *The document*

The document discussed here is a cloth-backed paper scroll containing nineteen lines of text written in an ornate but rather untidy *tshugs ring* script. It is kept in a tube of wood and metal. There is a square red seal at the end of the text, extending over the last four lines. A series of concentric squares may frame one or more Chinese characters, but this is not at all certain. The Samling archive also contains a copy of the document, in cursive *'khyug* script, that was presumably made for the purpose of consulting the content without risking unnecessary wear to the original. The latter is indeed damaged in places, and the fact that the copy is doubtful at some of these points suggests that it was made after the damage had already occurred. For the

sake of convenience the original and the copy will be referred to simply as Doc. 1 and Doc. 2 respectively.

The penultimate line states that the document has been issued to Samling gonpa by “the Mighty Ruler Kun dga’ ra dz[a]”. The date, which appears twice, is given as the Fire Ox year “during the reign of the Qianlong emperor”. The only Fire Ox year that fell during this emperor’s reign corresponds to 1757, and this enables us to identify the author of the document. The last volume of a recently-published ten-volume bilingual Chinese and Tibetan compilation of documents and articles relating to Gyalrong⁵ gives extensive genealogies of most of the eighteen kingdoms, and the only king with the name of Kun dga’ at that time was the ruler of Trokyab, Kun dga’ nor bu. Trokyab itself is not named in our document, and there are indications in the text that the patronage it announces is not unilateral but is being offered by a consortium of kingdoms.

The document claims to speak for “the eighteen kingdoms” of Gyalrong, but it is highly unlikely that all eighteen were actually implicated. Kun dga’ nor bu and his forebears were devout supporters of Bon institutions: among other things, in 1751, he and the king of Rabten, both patrons of the Bonpo master Kun grol grags pa (b. 1700), had sponsored the production of a woodblock version of the Bon canon; and in 1766, Kun dga’ nor bu and his queen, Tshe dbang lha mo, financed the carving of wood blocks of the sixteen-volume *Khams chen*.⁶ However, skirmishing between the various kingdoms seems to have been the usual state of affairs (except when these campaigns were suspended during the monsoon), and the document does even suggest that Trokyab had taken the side of the Qing in pacifying a number of recalcitrant enclaves that included principalities of Gyalrong. The *narratio* section of the document advertises Gyalrong’s loyalty to the Qing in its participation in earlier campaigns to subdue the Goloks and other hostile powers. There is an apparent reference to Dpal mgon, the ruler of the kingdom of Drandul who had provoked Qianlong’s fury, as well as other groups in Sichuan that had resisted the authority of the Qing.

The document is intended to accompany a number of gifts of ritual objects and money for the lama of Samling and the religious community in his care. Some of these gifts, such as the pair of cymbals – bearing an inscription by the donor – are still in the possession of the family. Since the document was issued more than four decades before the Gorkha unification of Nepal, when Dolpo was brought under the rule of Kathmandu, the author’s assurance that any act of aggres-

⁵ Rnga ba khul 2017.

⁶ Karmay 1998: 42. For a more general study of the production of Bonpo wood blocks in Gyalrong see Karmay 2005.

sion against Samling will be pursued with the full weight of Qing legal authority clearly cannot be seen as implying any interference in the affairs of a sovereign state.

While Trokyab had joined Rabten and Tsenla in patronising Bonpo masters, it seems not to have supported their opposition to the Qing during the first campaign; however, the fact that Rabten is not named as an antagonist in the document suggests that the Trokyab ruler preferred to overlook the differences between them. That the author of the document, the ruler of Trokyab, should emphasise his support for the Qing is both ironic and tragic, since it was precisely his later alliance with Rabten against the Manchus that led to his death.

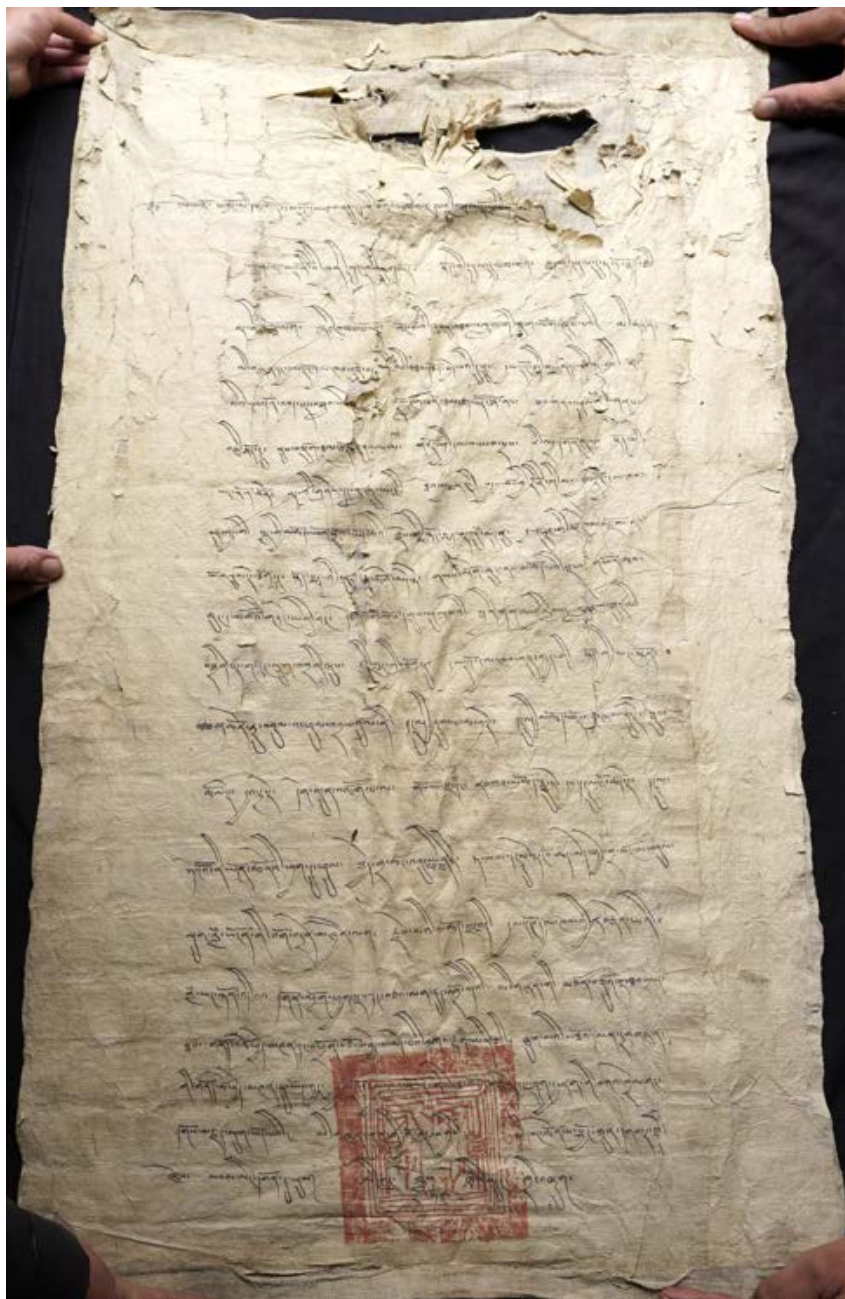


Fig. 1 — Doc. 1: The original document issued by the king of Trokyab, Kun dga' nor bu, to the lama of Samling, in Dolpo, in 1757. Photo: Kemi Tsewang.

4. *Transliteration of the document**Transliteration conventions*

- = Letter or stack unreadable due to physical damage
 [±2S] Approximately the given number of syllables is missing due to damage
 [abc] Letters missing due to damage but guessable with reasonable certainty from the context
 {abcd} Intentional deletion in the text
abcd Text intercalated below the line
 +abcd specified text is present in Doc. 2 but not in Doc. 1
 -abcd specified text is absent from Doc. 1
 Contracted forms (*bskungs yig*) are presented roughly as they appear, followed by the expanded version in brackets. Contracted forms in Doc. 2 are not reproduced.

The line numbering follows that of Doc. 1, the original document. Line numbers of Doc. 2 are given in italics. Variants found in Doc. 2 are given in italics immediately after the syllable concerned. Where variants entail several consecutive syllables, the syllables that appear in Doc. 1 are underlined.

Transliteration

1. § e ma ho / sa skyong mi dbang +*'od zer* chen po rgyal rong rgyal khab bcu rgyad kyi bka' yig *yi mdzad* pa'i bkul +*ba'i* ngor gyis *kyis don la* /

2. 2. rgya nag kong *gong* ma rin po che'i khyin *khrin* lung khri bzhugs lor / stod kyi yul du pal mag / smad *rmad* kyi yul du ta tro nye rtsi /

3. 3. bar gyi gho log / zhing khams so sor / kong ma'i zhabs su 'thab 'khrug gi thug log zhus pa'i / {~~mi gzhan~~}

4. mi gzhan dang rgyal rong 4. rgyal khab bcu brgyad [ky]i mi 'thab rtsod byed pa'i dus / rgyal rong 'di gzhan dang mi ma'i 'dra ba'i / kong

5. ma'i las don 5. 'bad par bsgrub pa'i [±2S] *don la* / 'gro drug sems can thams cad soor (so sor) sgo nas / skyabs gnas yulmog (yul mchog) gnas

6. bzhi gnas 6. bzhi sgor du sgo ru / bus *pus* btsug thal sbyor 'bul ba la / gtsor gyi rgyal ba yab sras / si 'bra se 'bras dgon sum / 7. stod kyi

7. yang ston cheno (chen po) / bar kyi gshen dang bru zhu spa rmi

sme / thob gya *brgya* sman ri / sangs rgyas chos kyī rinoe (rin po che)
8. 'di la / rgyal rong rgyal khab

8. bcu rgyad gi / sngar gyi mchod yon srol yod pa'i rjes kyī stod
smad bar suṃ mdunu (mdun du) / 9. rgyal =ung gi =e ma rgyal tung
gi lo gsum 'dzom nas

9. lo gsum re thog tu / stod smad kyī 'phul 'bul rgyu cheno (chen
po) med te / g.yas mteog (me 10. tog) chung nas mchod pa'i rdzas /
g.yon chab

10. chung rgya mtsho'i gteng *gting* yin kyang / rtse =g *cig* mos
dgus *gus* 11. phul ba'i / sbyin bdag la byin rlabs bsrung skud mi

11. {chung} +*chung* bsgrin par gnang lug *lugs* bkrin (bka drin) zhus
/ 12. =i *me* glang gyi thog du / rgyal rong rgyal khab bcu brgyad gi /
stod kyī yang ston

12. {13} cheno (chen po) ru 'bul ba *na* phul 'bras -'bras 13. tshul ni /
dngulyi (dngul gyi) buṃ pa cha gcig 1 re / dngulyi (dngul gyi)
mchod phor zhal bu re / sbug *sbug*

13. chol re / rgya' *rgyal* rnga re / 14. dge 'dun tshogs pa la / gsol
ja dang / nabza' (na bza') mchod rgyu te / rgya' *rgya* dngul rdo
tshad re / 15. dngul

14. te ngo'o *ngo bo* ni yngon (yang ston) chen po'i phyag tu phul /
skyed grwa tshang 'bul ba yinte (yin te) / 16. ta *da* lam dngul te ngo'o
ngo bo chad med skye *skyed* grwa tshang la 'bul 15. lug blaṃ (bla ma)
yngon (yang ston) gi 'go 'dren mkhyeen (mkhyen mkhyen) -*mkhyen*
lag *lags* / 17. rjes ma'i mchod rdzaṣ 'di / rgyal rong rgyal khab kyī
zhab rten *zhabs brten* yin /

16. blaṃ (bla ma) yang ston 'di la / dgon 'brog 18. phyag rdzas
dang bca' lag dud *tud* 'gro 'di'i / mi gzhan gi mtsa *brtsan* btsug ha ja
thab spar *yar*

17. thab gnod 'tshe byed -*byed* 19. mkhan dang / 'phrog bcom
byed sa med pa'i bka' rtag *brtag* yin cing / zhug ma'i mtho' *mtho*
dman dran *dran* gzhan

18. 20. gi gnod tshe byed byed mkhan su yod kyang / rgyal rong
rgygal 'khab so sor gi / rtsa chod rgyab rten rgyab shug *shag* 21. rgya
nag gi bka' khrems *khirms* gang

19. dgos mdzad lug *lugs* yod pa'i / mi gzhan kun gyi *gyis* ko go
bar bgyis / 22. mi dbang cheno (chen po) sa skyong kun dga' ra dza
[g?] *dzi*

20. zhes / msam *bsam* gling dgon du phul / 23. mi *me* glang zla 8
tshes 13 / khyin lung khri bzhug //

5. *Translation*

The following concerns the request to the Mighty Ruler to issue an official document of the Eighteen Kingdoms of Gyalrong. In a year when the Qianlong Emperor of China was on the throne, when the people of the Eighteen Kingdoms of Gyalrong went to war with others: the army of Dpal mgon above, the Dazhou rebels below and the Goloks in the middle,¹ who had risen against the Emperor, by reason of the earnest effort that Gyalrong made to further the emperor's aims, all the six classes of living beings knelt down with joined palms before the four places of refuge: foremost, the Enlightened Victor [the Dalai Lama] and his disciples, the Three Seats of Sera, Drepung [and Ganden], the great teacher of the Ya ngal clan in the West, and the [scions of the] Gshen, Bru, Zhu, Spa and Rme² families as well as Sman ri in Thob rgya³ in the middle – to these, the Eighteen Kingdoms of Gyalrong having traditionally in the past been in a relationship of patron and preceptor... every three years... since had not met for three years...

(The exact meaning of the entire sentence remains unclear because of damage to the text at this point; Doc. 2, which is likely to have been written after the damage occurred, is clearly inaccurate since it does not reproduce the 'grent bu in the fourth or fifth syllable of line 9 in Doc. 1.)

We do not have much either in our highland or our lowland area that we can offer. However, even if, on the one hand, a flower is something small it is nevertheless an item of offering, and on the other, if water is something small it does come from the depths of the ocean; we beg you to grant us, your patrons who make these offerings with single-pointed devotion, a protective cord as your blessing, though not for the sake of matching [our offering].⁴ In this Fire Ox year (1757), we make the following offerings to the Great Ya ngal Teacher:

- A pair of silver vases
- A silver bowl
- A pair of cymbals
- A bronze gong

For the community of monks: the cost of tea and robes for the monks, and one Chinese silver *dotse* coin for each.⁵ We are giving [additional] money (or silver) to the Great Yang ston lama himself as capital. The interest is to be offered to the monastic community; how the interest should be given to the monks' community without the principal being reduced is a matter that we request the Great Ya ngal Teacher to take charge of.⁶ These later items of offering are for the

performance of ceremonies on behalf of the kingdoms of Gyalrong.

This document is an order to the effect that no one may forcefully misuse the temple pasturelands,⁷ personal items and property or the livestock of the Great Ya ngal Teacher, or cause any harm or perpetrate theft. Should there be anyone in the future, whether high or low, mighty or humble, who does cause any harm, the individual kingdoms of Gyalrong shall apply whatever procedures are necessary within the law of China to undertake an investigation and to provide assistance and support – this is something that all should take heed of.

This document has been issued to Samling gonpa by the one known as the Mighty Ruler Kunga Raja. The 13th day of the 8th month in a Fire Ox year when Qianlong is seated on the throne.

Notes to the translation

1. Line 2, *pal mag...bar gyi gho log*: *pal mag* may stand for *dpal mgon gyi dmag*, “the army of dPal mgon”. The first Jinchuan War was largely a punitive expedition intended to apprehend Dpal mgon, the ruler of Drandul, whose subjects had perpetrated an act of banditry against a detachment of Qing soldiers (see above). Tsering Naljor has convincingly suggested to me that *Ta tro nye rtsi* refers to rebels (Ch. *nizei*) from Dazhou, in Sichuan, where resistance to the Qing would later culminate in the White Lotus uprising. The fact that the names are preceded by *smad*, “below”, does suggest they are located east of the Goloks, who had been the troublemakers “in the middle” (*bar*).

2. Line 7, *gshen dang bru zhu spa rme...*: these names refer to the five main Bonpo clans of Central Tibet. For a study of these clans, see Lhagyal 2000.

3. Line 7, *thob rgya*: a reference to Stobs rgyal, the name of the main village near the Bonpo monastery of Menri (founded in 1405).

4. Line 11, *bsgrin*: among its several meanings, the verb *sgrin pa* may signify to compare or to compete. Here it has been understood to mean that the lama should not consider the blessing that the petitioner is requesting as being a reciprocal gesture. Whatever the strategic reality of such *mchod yon* relationships may be, it is of course always essential to uphold the principle that teachings and blessings from one side and material benefits from the other are freely given, not exchanged.

5. Line 13, *rdo tshad*: the *dotse* is a bar of silver equal in weight and value to 50 *srang*. Although it is described in the document as being a “Chinese silver *dotse*”, it seems to have been a Tibetan, rather than Chinese, unit. In his account of a journey he made to Tibet in 1899,

Gombozhab Tsybikov comments on the coinage that was in use in Lhasa at the time:

There are no special coins for greater amounts [than the *dam-kha*], but the larger units of account in use are the *san* (*liang* in Chinese) which is made up of six and two-thirds coins (so that twenty coins equal approximately three *sans*), and the *dotse* or *yambu* which contains fifty *sans* or $333\frac{1}{3}$. (Tsybikov 2017: 96)

6. Line 15, *ngo'o chad med skye...zhab rten yin*: this passage apparently refers to the practice of establishing endowments, known as *sbyor 'jag*, for the performance of rituals (*zhabs brtan*) on behalf of patrons. According to this system, donations received from patrons are distributed among members of the religious community, who use the money as capital in trading ventures. Ten per cent of the interest must be used to sponsor annual performances of a designated ritual in perpetuity, with the corresponding merit being transferred to the patron. Any profit in excess of the ten per cent may be kept by the lamas. In this passage, the author of the document is effectively asking the lama to manage the endowment as he considers appropriate.

7. Line 16, *dgon 'brog*: this has been understood here as a compound rather than a reference to two distinct entities, though the meaning remains uncertain. It may refer to grasslands owned by the temple on which unauthorised herders may not graze their animals, or livestock belonging to the *gonpa* that are kept with the herds of pastoralists. This is a well-known practice whereby villagers who owned one or more female yaks might entrust them to pastoralists to take care of in an arrangement known as *skyes med 'chi med*, "irrespective of birth or death". The pastoralist would provide the owner with an agreed amount of dairy produce each year whether the animal lived or died; any calves it bore would become the property of the pastoralist.

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